

Message Text

PAGE 01 STATE 297288
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AMEMBASSY DOHA PRIORITY
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY MANAMA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY MUSCAT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY
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AMEMBASSY TEHRAN PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI PRIORITY
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AMEMBASSY KUWAIT PRIORITY
TREASURY PRIORITY

S E C R E T STATE 297288

E.O. 11652:XGDS-2

TAGS: EG, IS, PINR

SECRET

PAGE 02 STATE 297288

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LONDON FOR KINSOLVING
PARIS FOR NICHOLAS MURPHY
OTHER ADDRESSEES FOR CHIEFS OF MISSION

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ARRIVAL IN DAMASCUS TODAY, PRESIDENT ASSAD UNDERTOOK AN
EXHAUSTING ROUND OF DIPLOMATIC CONTACTS WITH OFFICIALS
REPRESENTING VARYING SHADES OF ARAB AND INTERNATIONAL

OPINION. HE HAS BEEN ACTIVELY PURSUING A POLICY AIMED AT:

(A) REAFFIRMING SYRIA'S ADHERENCE TO THE GOAL OF A PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT AND TO MAINTAINING HIS BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US;

(B) COMPETING WITH SADAT TO CONVINCE ARAB OPINION THAT ONLY RELIANCE UPON A FIRM BARGAINING STANCE AND ARAB SOLIDARITY WILL WRING CONCESSIONS FROM ISRAEL;

(C) ASSURING THE VARIOUS FACTIONS WHICH SUPPORT HIS REGIME THAT SYRIA WILL BE ABLE TO COUNT ON BOTH CONTINUED

MILITARY ASSISTANCE FROM THE SOVIETS AND FINANCIAL AID FROM THE SAUDIS AND THE GULF STATES.

2. WHILE ASSAD HAS CLEARLY SUCCEEDED IN DISTINGUISHING HIS POLICY FROM IRAQ'S SELF-ISOLATING REJECTIONISM AND FROM WHAT HE VIEWS AS SADAT'S CAPITULATIONIST TENDENCIES, IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT SYRIA'S STANCE WILL MOVE ARAB PUBLIC OPINION IN HIS DIRECTION. SADAT HIMSELF EXUDES CONFIDENCE THAT HE, RATHER THAN ASSAD, WILL BE ABLE TO OBTAIN THE SUPPORT OF THE SYRIAN PUBLIC AS WELL AS THAT
SECRET

PAGE 03 STATE 297288

OF THE OTHER ARABS FOR HIS INITIATIVE. INDEED, ASSAD MAY WELL HAVE OVERESTIMATED THE DEPTH OF FEELING AGAINST SADAT IN SYRIA.

3. HAVING IDENTIFIED A PASSIVE CONSTITUENCY INSIDE SYRIA, IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN HOW SADAT WILL USE IT. HE HAS AT LEAST THREE CHOICES, ALL OF WHICH WILL TEND TO KEEP ASSAD OFF BALANCE. SADAT CAN:

(A) USE HIS OWN POPULARITY IN SYRIA TO UNDERMINE ASSAD'S INFLUENCE WITH THE SAUDIS AND GULF ARABS DURING HIS ANTICIPATED GULF TOUR;

(B) ATTEMPT TO MANIPULATE SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION TO EXERT PRESSURE AGAINST ASSAD DOMESTICALLY;

(C) HIGHLIGHT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SYRIAN OFFICIAL POSITION AND DOMESTIC OPINION AS A MEANS OF INDUCING BEGIN TO ADOPT A MORE FLEXIBLE NEGOTIATING STANCE.

4. WHILE SADAT'S INITIATIVE HAS CREATED PROBLEMS FOR THE SYRIAN LEADER, ASSAD IS NOT A GOOD TARGET FOR THOSE WHO WOULD HOPE TO DISPLACE HIM. ASSAD STILL DOMINATES THE FOREIGN POLICY PROCESS IN SYRIA; EVEN THOUGH MANY SYRIANS, INCLUDING SOME IN THE MILITARY, MAY DIFFER WITH HIM ABOUT THE SADAT INITIATIVE, MOST STILL SUPPORT HIS LEADERSHIP. LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD, HOWEVER, ASSAD

CAN EXPECT TROUBLE ON THE HOMEFRONT IF SADAT'S INITIATIVE
CAN PRODUCE TANGIBLE BENEFITS FOR SYRIA WHICH ASSAD
REFUSES TO ACCEPT.

5. CONSEQUENTLY, IN OUR VIEW, SADAT MAINTAINS SOME
ABILITY TO AFFECT THE INTERNAL DEBATE IN SYRIA ABOUT HIS
INITIATIVE. BY PRESSING AHEAD ON HIS OWN, SADAT
PROBABLY WILL BE ABLE TO EXACERBATE SECTARIAN AND
POLITICAL TENSIONS THAT ASSAD HAS KEPT UNDER CONTROL.
SECRET

PAGE 04 STATE 297288

WHILE THESE TENSIONS WOULD BECOME MORE SERIOUS IF SADAT
WERE ABLE TO POINT TO IMPORTANT ISRAELI CONCESSIONS, IT

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CONSTITUENCIES TO OPPOSE THE EGYPTIAN INITIATIVE I ONE
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A QUOTA ON RETURNING PALESTINIANS.

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SECRET

PAGE 05 STATE 297288

WEATHER FRIENDS, WHILE LIBYANS AND ALGIERS ARE SEEN AS
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10. THE LEBANESE, MEANWHILE, ARE VERY CONCERNED OVER THE IMPACT OF SADAT'S CURRENT PEACE INITIATIVE ON THEM. AS EMBASSY BEIRUT HAS COMMENTED, THE LEBANESE ARE GENERALLY FAVORABLE TO SADAT'S INITIATIVE; NEVERTHELESS, THEY ARE CONCERNED OVER THE POTENTIAL REPERCUSSIONS.

11. OVER THE SHORT TERM, THEY FEAR THAT GROWING DISSENSION IN ARAB RANKS COULD MANIFEST ITSELF IN INCREASED VIOLENCE IN LEBANON. THE LEBANESE REMEMBER ALL TOO WELL THAT THEIR "CIVIL WAR" COULD NOT BE SETTLED UNTIL AFTER THE SYRIANS AND THE EGYPTIANS SETTLED THEIR
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PAGE 06 STATE 297288

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12. THE LACK OF GOVERNMENT CONTROL IN SOUTHERN LEBANON LEAVES THIS AREA OPEN TO VARIOUS PARTIES TO INCREASE AREA WIDE TENSION IF THEY ARE NOT HAPPY WITH THE PROGRESS OF THE CAIRO CONFERENCE. THE REJECTIONISTS, SYRIANS, PLO, AND ISRAELIS ALL HAVE SUFFICIENT ASSETS IN THE SOUTH TO REKINDLE SHARP CLASHES. FOR THE REJECTIONISTS, SOUTHERN LEBANON IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT IS THE ONLY LOCATION FROM WHICH THEY CAN ATTACK ISRAEL WITHOUT DIRECT CONTROL FROM A RESPONSIBLE ARAB GOVERNMENT.

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14. THE DISTRACTION OF THE SYRIANS, PALESTINIANS, ISRAELIS AND THE LEBANESE FROM THE QUESTION OF SOUTH LEBANON BY THE SADAT INITIATIVE HAS RESULTED IN THE SHELIVING, PERHAPS PERMANENTLY, OF THE SHTAWRAH AGREEMENT. ALTHOUGH LEBANESE OFFICIALS CONTINUE TO GIVE LIP SERVICE TO ITS IMPLEMENTATION, STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE SYRIANS, PLO AND REJECTIONISTS MAKE IT UNLIKELY THAT THEY WILL BE WILLING TO CONCEDE ANYTHING IN LEBANON
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PAGE 07 STATE 297288

WHICH MAY LIMIT THEIR ABILITY TO ACT IN THE BROADER ARAB CONTEXT.

15. THE PLO, MOREOVER, IS INCREASINGLY CONCERNED THAT ANY RESTRICTION ON THEIR ACTIONS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON WOULD ONLY INCREASE SYRIAN CONTROL OVER THEIR ORGANIZATION. THEY ARE ALREADY VERY SENSITIVE TO THEIR INCREASING DEPENDENCE ON DAMASCUS.

16. THESE ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS APPEAR LIKELY TO BE SUFFICIENT TO BLOCK FURTHER ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILING THE LEBANESE POLITICAL FACTIONS. IN FACT, REPORTS INDICATE THAT SUSPICION AND DISTRUST MAY EVEN BE ON THE RISE. PRESIDENT SARKIS, MOREOVER, HAS SHOWN LITTLE INCLINATION TO TAKE THE RISKS NECESSARY TO BEGIN TO RECONSTITUTE THE LEBANESE POLITICAL STRUCTURE. THE PRESIDENT IS BEING CRITICIZED IN MANY QUARTERS FOR NOT MOVING AHEAD MORE QUICKLY.

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CHRISTOPHER

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S E C R E T STATE 297288

FOL TEL SENT ACTION SINAI INFO ABU DHABI ALGIERS DOHA
JERUSALEM LONDON MANAMA MOSCOW MUSCAT NOUAKCHOTT PARIS
RABAT TEHRAN TRIPOLI TUNIS KUWAIT TREASURY FROM SECSTATE
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SECRET

PAGE 03 STATE 297288

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CHRISTOPHER UNQTE VANCE

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